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ABSTRACT

While group singing of composed songs and the singing that takes place during circle games are the commonest forms of music instruction for young children, children should also be encouraged to engage in free musical play or spontaneous singing. In spontaneous singing, the child creates a song at a moment's notice while engaged in play. Free musical play is a type of spontaneous singing that children engage in when they are using the free-improvisational stream-of-consciousness style needed for vocal inflection and copycat games, singing conversations using puppets, and improvisational singing based on stories, picture books, or cartoons. Teachers can encourage free musical play by modeling spontaneous songs during storybook time, puppet play, or normal classroom activities. After spontaneous singing is firmly established, the teacher gradually can begin to teach the structured, composed songs that children in Piaget's preoperational stage need to learn. It is important to choose songs that consider the child's vocal characteristics and that are not too sophisticated. These first songs should have limited range and pitch, simple rhythms, understandable vocabulary, obvious rhymes, and repetition. Songs should reflect common bodies of knowledge important for children and should include heritage songs such as "America." As the child matures, spontaneous singing eventually becomes a vehicle for vocal development and a means of sharing personal experiences and feelings. (CB)

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A BALANCED PROGRAM FOR THE YOUNG CHILD: SPONTANEOUS AND STRUCTURED SINGING

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The following article is based on the session titled "Singing: The Young Child's Way", presented at the Music in Early Childhood Conference held in Provo, Utah, June 28-30, 1984. The Conference was sponsored by: Brigham Young University Colleges of Fine Arts and Communications and Family, Home and Social Sciences, Music Educators National Conference and the Association for Childhood Education International.

If one were to observe a three or four-year old child throughout the day, both at home and at the preschool and playground, one would rapidly discover how singing is a favored and natural activity. Singing is a natural vehicle by which children respond to and conceptualize about their world. Educators have encouraged this natural musical response and have collected simple children's songs and folk songs for hundreds of years. Today, one of the most common musical activities involves children sitting in a group singing songs while the teacher accompanies them on the piano, guitar or by playing records. In another favorite activity, children stand in circle formations and participate in play-party games such as "Put Your Right Foot In." After working with the young child over a number of years in a variety of settings, Barbara Andress, one of the contemporary leaders in music in early childhood has presented another viewpoint. In her book Music Experiences in Early Childhood, she states:

> *Our traditional approach involving children in large group settings where they listen, play, sing and move to heritage song materials, can no longer represent the sole mode of learning (1980, p. 3).*

What, then, are the other modes of music development, particularly vocal development, suitable for the three and four-year old child? Can these children benefit from a setting other than the familiar large group, circle formation? Later on, Andress states:

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> *With intermittent use of the echo play techniques, this free musical play remains the central focus for vocal development of the three-year and early four-year old (1980, p. 56).*

A brief overview of the goals and functions of singing in the preschool and the characteristics of the young childs' singing voice will lay the foundation for the description of these new modes and setting for vocal development.

The goals of singing for the young child are the same as for people of all ages--to develop and express one's own personal musical ideas and to develop the ability to sing the composed songs of one's heritage. The functions of singing are related to the goals. Singing should be an avenue through which a child can express himself in a personally meaningful as well as esthetic manner. However, singing can also be a tool which children can use to learn about their culture and about themselves. Thus, it is common to hear children sing counting songs when learning about numbers, alphabet songs when learning about the alphabet and citizenship songs when learning about the society in which they live. Hopefully, they are also given opportunities to make up their own little songs for their own personal esthetic expression.

Adults working with the young child must be aware of the child's vocal characteristics and take them into consideration when planning singing activities. First of all, the range should be limited to d-a above middle c. That is, most of the notes of the song should fall between those two notes. For the church choir alto who is leading young children in singing this may mean raising the pitch in order to accommodate the children. It is easiest for the child to sing songs limited to only 3-5 pitches in the beginning. Once a child is motivated to learn a song the range can be more extensive. Children have difficulty in coordinating the several aspects of a song--rhythm,

melody, expressive elements, words. They tend to focus on one little aspect, such as the end of a phrase, a funny word or a jazzy rhythm. Children are beginning to understand what a song is--that it has a melodic contour, rhythmic patterns, a beginning, an end and a tonal center. They tend to simplify complex rhythms. They are just beginning to perceive the difference between the singing voice and the speaking voice. Lastly, they tend to confuse musical concepts such as high with loud and soft with slow.

Learning heritage or other structured, already composed songs is important for every child. However, it should be preceeded and accompanied with free musical play or spontaneous singing. Free musical play is basically the spontaneous singing children engage in when they are using the free improvisatory, stream-of-consciousness style needed for vocal inflection games, copycat games, singing conversations using puppets, singsong stories and improvisatory singing based on stories, picture books or cartoons. In spontaneous singing, the child dictates, creates and sculpts the song at a moment's notice to suit his or her own vocal ability and expressive desires. The child makes up songs while playing, for example, with toys or while skipping, using a free association, free improvisatory style. While children play, they are relaxed and their minds think freely, with no barriers. They sing charming, stream-of-consciousness songs, with repeated consonants as well as babbling, scribbling kinds of phrases (Andress, 1980, p. 86). Piagetians know that at this early developmental stage, children through spontaneous singing are beginning to form musical images of the sensorimotor activities in which they are engaged (Gjerdingen, 1982, p. 27). They know that this kind of activity can be expected during the preoperational stage occurring generally between ages two and seven as described by Piaget. It is not until the concrete operational stage, generally occurring between ages seven and eleven,

depending on the developmental readiness of the child, that a child can change his behavior in order to accommodate rules and work with existing structures. It is during this time when structured singing is appropriate and when a child can respond to the dictates of a composed song (Weikart, 1984). The child disciplines himself to reproduce a song with already given pitches, rhythm, harmony and form. This ability to operate within rules is developed through activities such as finger plays, Mother Goose rhymes, chants, echo games, question-answer games, matching pitch activities and any activity which helps establish pitch, rhythm and feeling for tonality.

Spontaneous singing is the foremost vehicle for vocal development for the young child and should preceed and accompany structured singing. While children are eager to learn traditional nursery songs and are eager to sing them correctly, adults must be aware that the child's ability to sing spontaneously should not be ignored and forgotten. The unpredictability of spontaneous singing should not deter the teacher who feels more comfortable with a more controlled and predictable music program. One must keep in mind that children need to participate in a balanced singing program which incorporates both spontaneous and structured singing.

How can an adult who has not sung in a spontaneous manner for years learn to sing in this style? To begin with, one should sing with the children about something with which they are familiar. The child's stage of language development will guide the choice of words (Andress, 1984). The vocabulary of the songs which children create could range from babytalk to charming rhymes. The adult may wish to use an oftenread storybook and sing the story rather than read it. Perhaps the child could sing the words of one of the characters and the adult another character. Several children could become involved and each take a part. The teacher could sing the narrative.

A child can use storybooks with no text also. While paging through a storybook he or she could creatively singsong a story about the pictures. An adult could play with a child and while the child is swinging or playing with a ball, for example, they could make up songs to go with the physical actions of the play activity. If the child is pretending to wash a dish, the adult could use a familiar tune such as "Rain, rain, go away" and make up new words such as, "Wash the dish,wash the dish, Put in soap and swish, swish, swish!" Having a familiar tune for a starting point is helpful, however, children may wish to make up songs that go beyond the melody or rhythm of the original familiar tune. They may wish to extend the phrases and linger over particularly enjoyable rhyming words.

Another activity which develops the child's ability to sing spontaneously involves the use of puppets in singing conversations and vocal inflection games. Several children could be given puppets, preferably puppets whose mouths can actually open and close. The teacher can sing questions to each of the children and they can respond individually from where they are seated. Sometimes the children may wish to come and stand in back of a screen (a discarded refrigerator box, a length of fabric through which holes have been cut for the children to put through their arms, etc.) Such anonimity will encourage more creativity and freedom in response. Children may make up names for the puppets, alter their vocal inflection to better suit the imagined character of the puppet and dare to be more dramatic when hidden in back of a screen. To begin with, children may only vary their vocal inflection, but eventually, they can be encouraged and prompted to use their singing voices for their responses. Seemingly outrageous and funny questions can engender equally outrageous and funny responses. For example, if the puppet has green hair, one could ask with a singing voice,

"Why is your hair green?" The child might respond that his mother fixed it that way or that spinach turned his hair green!

Once children are solidly involved in singing spontaneously one can begin to think of asking them to sing in a more structured manner. Most children need to gradually prepare themselves to learn a song. First they need to enjoy the thythm of the words. They also need to feel the highs and lows of the melody and they need to work on perceiving pitch. It does not come together all in one magical moment (Davidson, McKernon, Gardner, 1981, pp. 307-308). Through readiness activities such as finger plays, nursery rhymes, pitch-matching games and echo games, the young child gradually begins to accumulate enough pieces to complete the whole picture.

The teacher may wish to use the following criteria when selecting structured songs for the young child to learn. To begin with, choose a song that is pitched in the proper range and which tends to focus around only 3-5 pitches. Children are learning to match pitch and find this easier to do when they do not have to sing notes which are obviously too high, too low or too awkward for them. The text should be appealing to children. That is, the rhymes should be obvious and fun and the vocabulary understandable for the young child. It is preferable if the songs are not too wordy, that is, if the words do not change for every pitch sung. It is easier for children to sing songs which use repetition of text as well as of melodic phrases. Simplicity and repetition are two major criteria to keep in mind! Of course, songs should be appealing to children. Sometimes adults tend to choose songs which are too sophisticated for children. They choose song from musicals or songs which are obviously their own personal favorites. Sometimes teachers choose hit songs which almost always are too rhythmically complex for young children. Since children are moving from a

preoperational to a concrete operational stage, songs which involve actions are accessible and natural for them. This becomes obvious when we think of the favorite songs of children: "The Eency, Weency Spider", "Down at the Station", "The People in the Bus"--to name a few. Songs which are based on common bodies of knowledge are important for children, for example, songs about colors, numbers, family, community helpers, seasons of the year and Mother Goose rhymes. We must also keep in mind that we are responsible for passing on the songs of our heritage and, thus, it is important that children learn to sing songs such as "America" and "Yankee Doodle". Some of the patriotic songs are too wordy and sophisticated for the young child. They end up singing a song, not pronouncing the words corrrectly and not understanding the meaning of them.

To summarize, three and early four-year old children are simply not developmentally ready to live by strict rules. They, in fact, are just beginning to encounter the world and are busily acquiring a wardrobe of perceptions through their senses--seeing, touching, hearing, smelling and tasting. Their need to acquire concrete experiences is also going on with their singing voices. Thus, children use their voices in a highly exploratory and improvisatory manner. Little babies coo and babble. Toddlers chatter on and on as they play with their toys. Eventually they begin to use singing as a nonverbal symbol of their everyday experiences. They begin to inflect their voices as they play with little toy cars. They sing gently as they hold a babydoll. They hum distractedly as they play with toys, their hums changing as the activity changes. Their spontaneous singing eventually becomes a vehicle for vocal development and a means for sharing their own personal experiences and feelings. Through the years, as children grow into adulthood, They will find many occasions when they want to share an idea or feeling

for which words are not adequate. It is then that children, who are musically aware human beings, will blossom, capable of expressing themselves through song in a spontaneous as well as in a structured manner.

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